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SUBJECT: MODERATE TUNISIAN RESPONSE TO CARTOON CRISIS

¶1. (U) Summary: Most Tunisian intellectuals and media responded with moderate and thoughtful commentary to the Danish cartoons featuring the Prophet Mohamed. While some editors used the polemic as an occasion to again criticize American foreign policy in the Arab world, most of the editorial reaction focused on trying to explain the cultural differences between the Arab and Western worlds, condemning the resulting violence, and suggesting ways in which the Arab world could better respond to threats both from within and without. While GOT policy ensured that there were no public protests on the cartoons, it is debatable if any such demonstrations would have occurred had they been permitted. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Tunisian media closely followed the origins of the cartoon crisis and the violent responses that ensued. The Tunisian press prominently covered those Western figures who spoke out against the cartoons, including the comments made by the White House spokesperson Scott McClellan. While some editors, particularly in the pan-Arab, anti-American press, used this occasion to once again criticize Western, particularly American, policy in the region, most private newspapers provided thoughtful and moderate commentary on the cultural differences underlying the issue and condemned the violent response of citizens in other Muslim countries. Examples of the Tunisian commentary on the subject included:

-- On February 2, an editor at private French language paper "Le Temps" asked why the Arab world had not reacted as strongly or in as unified a manner to the damaging image of Bin Laden as it had to the Danish cartoons. The author concluded that it was time for modern and moderate Arab intellectuals to begin serious self-examination before they were "irremediably set aside by history."

-- On February 9, the lead editorial in a private bilingual weekly magazine "Realites" argued that the cartoon controversy was the result of extremists in both the West and in the Arab world. The author noted that the "Muslim world is today living in a particularly delicate phase of history" in which governments' failure to address local economic, social, political and identity issues was contributing to a "real rupture between leaders and their people" which led to a rise in religious extremism. The author concluded that it was high time for the elite, civil society, political classes, and media to undertake serious efforts to reform the region.

-- On February 16, "Realites" carried a series of commentaries on the offensive cartoons, most of which criticized the violent reactions that had followed the

publication of the images. The lead editorial by Zyed Krichen began by explaining that the West had often permitted satirical commentary on political and religious figures, to include Jesus Christ, but noted that the Holocaust has long been off limits. He went on to argue that self-examination was always useful, but critiques of others' religion and culture can border on the offensive. The author argued that the Persians have long permitted the image of the Prophet, thereby questioning the basis of some of the protests and concluded that the violent reaction by some Muslims had only served to further deepen misunderstanding between the West and the Muslim world. While a second writer argued that the Muslim anger over the issue is a result of the perceived double standard policy and the "American imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq," he joined a third writer in concluding that the violent reactions did not provide a positive image of Islam. A fourth commentary dissected the differences between "the resolutely secular, fundamentally materialist, and radically individualist" West and the completely different Islamic civilization and then argued that only the neo-conservatives and the Islamists could benefit from this kind of disagreement.

-- On February 22, privately owned Arab language daily "As Sabah" ran a full page interview of a Tunisian author and intellectual, Abdelmajid Charfi. This interview was later reprinted in its entirety in the French language daily "Le Temps." In this interview, which was widely read and very well-received, Charfi argued that "freedom of expression in Denmark" should not be understood as an attack against Arab beliefs. The author condemned the use of "religious belief to conduct barbaric action that does not reflect Islam's value of tolerance." The author then went on to detail the real differences between the West and the Muslim world, concluding that "if we want to change our relations with the West from confrontation to dialogue, we have to modernize our societies in order to talk to the West on equal footing. In such a state of scientific, technological, political and cultural underdevelopment, we cannot really expect the West to respect us." Charfi also called on Arab governments to become democratic regimes and argued that "it is time for us to forget about positions based on emotion and become more efficient in our societies."

#### Comment

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13. (SBU) The moderate Tunisian reaction to the cartoon crisis can be attributed to the close cultural and historic ties that Tunisians share with their European neighbors and the generally secular nature of the society (even though Tunisia is 99 percent Muslim, many of whom are observant). Tunisian intellectuals played an important role in providing a measured and thoughtful response to a potentially very divisive subject. While some believe that there would have been public demonstrations against the cartoons were such gatherings permitted by the GOT, others assert that most Tunisians, while upset by the disrespect shown to their religion, were smart enough to understand the underlying cultural differences that gave rise to the issue. All agree that any public reaction would have been peaceful in nature.  
BALLARD